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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VERVEER AND SECRETARY SIKRI SUPPORT
BROAD-BASED WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT DIALOGUE

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Ambassador Melanne Verveer met Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) Secretary Devender Kumar Sikri on November 9 to discuss the Women's Empowerment Dialogue (WED). Sikri described the GOI's ideas for WED discussion topics. These included social and economic empowerment, building the capacity of self-help groups, micro-credit, political participation, education, violence against women, healthcare, and gender budgeting. Verveer stressed the importance of self-help groups who are engaged in economic activity and the need to help connect their products to wider markets. Sikri and Verveer both agreed that women's empowerment is a cross-cutting issue that should be woven into all components of the U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue. The Indian side agreed to consider co-sponsoring the Women's Leadership Summit in New Delhi in 2010, and the U.S. side agreed to review the GOI's proposed WED agenda. After the meeting, Verveer briefly met MWCD Minister Krishna Tirath who expressed strong support for the WED. END SUMMARY

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

¶2. (SBU) After expressing the GOI's strong support for the Women's Empowerment Dialogue (WED), Secretary Sikri informed Verveer that an announcement on this initiative is expected to be made during Prime Minister Singh's official state visit to Washington later this month. (Comment: Sikri was likely referring to a mention of the WED in the Joint Statement to be issued by both leaders. End Comment.) Sikri then outlined the GOI's ideas for areas to discuss through the WED. We should first start by looking at areas in which each nation has strengths, he declared. On economic empowerment, Sikri stressed the importance of concentrating on the grassroots and pointed to the GOI's assistance in helping some five million self-help groups, 90 percent of whose members are women. The GOI facilitates loans totaling USD 1.25 billion to these groups and plans to universalize the program by ¶2015.

¶3. (SBU) Political empowerment is equally important, Sikri asserted. India already reserves 30 percent of local village council (panchayat) seats for women. By 2010, 1.5 million women are expected to be elected in these councils. Sikri told Verveer elections to village councils have empowered women by giving them confidence and a sense of identity. Verveer suggested training for female members to help them become more effective in village councils, and examining national legislation to ensure implementation and greater effectiveness at the local level as other areas the WED could explore.

SELF-HELP GROUPS

14. (SBU) Verveer raised the importance of focusing on self-help groups (SHG), stressing that the WED should explore ways to link women's economic work to trade and the larger marketplace. These groups produce great products, she observed, which we should help by enhancing their quality, business practices, and their connections to large outside markets. Expanding credit to small and medium-sized businesses is another excellent area for cooperation under the WED, especially since micro-credit has been a success story in India. Joint Secretary Manjula Krishnan described the GOI's financial assistance to self-help groups, underscoring that the GOI views them as a means of both economic and social empowerment. Krishnan explained that the MWCD's National Women's Microcredit (Rashtriya Mahila Kosh) program promotes many innovative lending projects. The program's success has attracted the attention of President Pratibha Patil, she said, who has called for expanding the program's scope. Under the program, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) apply for money that is then transferred to SHGs. Sikri added that the program looks at ways to minimize transaction costs. Krishnan cited one study that showed a decrease in domestic violence as one outcome of the program. Verveer responded that data demonstrating such a correlation would be useful in advocating for such programs elsewhere.

GENDER BUDGETING

15. (SBU) Sikri told Verveer the MWCD is the lead coordinating ministry to implement the concept of gender budgeting across

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the GOI bureaucracy. Joint Secretary Manjula Krishnan described the MWCD's efforts, although she admitted that the GOI is still on the learning curve. The GOI is cooperating with international institutions, encouraging every Indian ministry to set up a gender budgeting cell to ensure women's concerns are reflected in ministerial programs, and holding workshops and drafting training manuals. Verveer acknowledged that the U.S. could learn from India's experience as it makes progress in this field.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

16. (SBU) The MWCD has focused on violence against women through the village councils, but Sikri said the GOI wants to learn from the U.S. on the institutional response to violence against women. Verveer noted that violence is a pressing challenge that harms families and impedes economic prosperity. Running down a list of other areas for discussion like police and judicial reforms, education, health and nutrition, HIV/AIDS, foster care for the girl child, and homes for senior citizens, Sikri stressed that these proposed ideas are only the beginning.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: CROSS-CUTTING ISSUE

17. (SBU) Verveer solicited Sikri's thoughts on how to ensure that women's empowerment---which is an issue that cuts across many topics from energy to education---is woven into other dialogues under the U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue. For example, although cook stoves fall under the climate change dialogue, they are also a women's empowerment issue. Sikri replied that the GOI has already held inter-ministerial meetings on this challenge. The MWCD will work with the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy to explore how SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) can participate in the cook stove project. Verveer agreed, stressing that women who are empowered can become drivers of low carbon green technology at the local level which will help support the overall climate change agenda.

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

¶8. (SBU) Verveer informed Sikri of the USG's support for a Women's Leadership Summit in New Delhi on September 14-17, 2010 that is being coordinated by the NGO, Vital Voices. The conference will bring together companies, NGOs, and SHGs to focus on ways to expand women's empowerment. She requested Sikri to encourage the GOI's co-sponsorship of, and participation in, the conference. Sikri replied that the GOI will consider the request, but noted the conference dates fall during the run-up to the October 2010 Commonwealth Games hosted in New Delhi. Thus, obtaining high-level GOI participation may prove difficult, Sikri averred. (Note: The Commonwealth Games are the second-largest sporting event after the Olympics, and New Delhi has received much criticism for poor games coordination and significant delays in the construction of venues. However, the summit will not occur at the same time as the Games. End Note.)

NEXT STEPS

¶9. (SBU) Both Verveer and Sikri expressed support for a broad-based Women's Empowerment Dialogue. The U.S. side agreed to review the GOI's proposed WED agenda outlining areas of collaboration and cooperation, and to give the GOI its comments. The GOI agreed to consider co-sponsoring and participating in the Women's Leadership Summit in New Delhi. Verveer mentioned the idea of a "Women's Empowerment Fund" that could potentially serve as a catalyst for foundations and civil society actors to advance WED objectives. Sikri saw merit in exploring this concept further. (Comment: It was clear Ambassador Verveer's visit prompted intensive efforts over several days by MWCD officials to put together a suggested agenda and to move the process forward. End Comment.)

MINISTER TIRATH

¶10. (SBU) In a brief courtesy meeting afterward, MWCD Minister Krishna Tirath told Verveer she supported the

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U.S.-India WED. Verveer told Tirath she believed this dialogue will be productive since both our leaders, President Obama and Prime Minister Singh, care deeply about these issues. Regarding agenda topics, Sikri interjected that there is "perfect meeting of the minds."

BIO NOTE

¶11. (U) Secretary Sikri recently joined the MWCD on November ¶3. Nevertheless, he was well-briefed and held command over the meeting with Verveer. He previously served as Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India/Special Secretary in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In that capacity, he told Ambassador Verveer he had useful exchanges with the U.S. Census Board. Sikri's other assignments include the Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers, Ministry of Welfare, and postings in the Gujarat state government. Sikri holds a Master's Degree in Advanced Mathematics and hails from the Indian state of Gujarat. He speaks fluent English, Hindi, and Gujarati.

¶12. (U) This cable was cleared by Ambassador Verveer.
ROEMER